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STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF THE
ARTS OF THE EAST

THE
ARTS OF THE EAST

THE DEATH
OF
ALEXANDER THE GREAT.

NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM, 1884.

BY
CECIL HENRY BOUTFLOWER,
SCHOLAR OF CHRIST CHURCH.

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*Prince of Humilities, at whose dear feet
These thoughts are laid in lowly dress,
Of Pride cast down to overthrow complete,
Greatness made nothingness,—
O let no blighting whisper of that change
Wherewith not Greatness' self may cope,
Set down the strings of life to meaner range,
Or bind the wings of Hope.
Speak Thou of nobler faith, and make us see
The pathless heights of things made possible in Thee.*

The Death of Alexander the Great.

THERE be some themes not ready made to song,
Whereon the bard must muse and ponder long,
And work with words, and trick the dainty page
With all fantastic phrases of the age,
To make a poem where was none before ;
And when the words are lost, the thought lives on no
more.

But there are stories in the tale of time
Almost too grandly great for paltry rhyme ;
No lyric dream, but drama stern and high
Writ with the iron pen of Destiny,
Upon whose page God's own handwritings burn,
And cry aloud on men to look, and learn.
So when our childhood treads the old-world scene
And plays among the graves of what hath been,
Half-careless, by the hand of learning led
To search the wreckage of the mighty dead ;
There are some spots where even childhood's eyes
Stand wide and wonder with a big surprise ;
The figures are so large, the hues so bright,
They linger long upon the spell-bound sight.

And still those scenes come back as years advance,
Clad in the colour and the circumstance
That our child-fancy gave them as it grew,
Untaught, untutored, and perchance untrue,
But fired by that one vision, broad, sublime,—
That image graven in the rock of time,
Stranger than fiction; aye, a wilder thing.

And thou wast such to me, great dying king.
Not for thy greatness, nor thy kingliness,
Nor dazzling pomp, nor noontide of success;
But Greatness when the great one comes to die
Is linked with something of humanity.
Oh then the chord of Tragedy rings deep,
Then wake the inmost heart-strings out of sleep
In yearning strange, whose sources none may tell
To hear the vast acclaim of startled hell
Stirred up to meet his coming—Can it be?
Art thou a man? Art thou become as we?

Oh, when thy last great triumph swept along,
When swelled and swelled again the pæan-song;
And through the lulls came chaunted with the wind
Blessings of grateful gods;—Farspread behind
The sea of conquerors, and the conquered round
Shake the blue air, and garland all the ground
That undergroaned the tramlings of that car,
Where of Achilles' god-like line the star

Rode yet more god-like : where the incense fumes
From silver altars curled about the plumes
Of forty standards, that had learned to droop
And blush in blood before the onward swoop
Of Macedonia's eagle. On they came
To rest a little on the heights of fame,
To sheathe the Grecian steel in Eastern gold
And view beneath the travelled distance, rolled
In mists of blood and glory. See there wait
About his chariot wheels, to call him great,
Princes and peoples out of every clime,
That bring the crowns of nations, spoils of time ;
See how they throng about his feet to fall
And hail him lord and king, the Great, the All in all.

Two moons have waxed, and two have waned upon
The motley splendours of great Babylon,
Its pomps and pageants, sacrifices, vows,
High feast and revelling and wild carouse,—
And this is Alexander ! He who lies
Unrobed, ungarlanded, uncrowned. The eyes
Are very weak and weary : speech has fled
The lips that shattered kingdoms ; and the head
A world had thronged to gaze on, listless lay
And hid its heavings from the light of day.
The chieftains one by one with fearful tread
And sword ungirt had kneeled beside the bed,

And stooped to touch, and hardly knew the hand
That oft had flashed on high the foremost brand.
And now they too were gone ; an anxious few,
The tried and trusted, watched the long hours through
That brought the crisis : waiting on the brink,—
Waiting—they knew not what, nor cared to think.

Without the evening lingered. Far and wide
The towering city brooded o'er the tide
That swept her palaces,—then flashed between
White walls, dark-fringing palms, or pastures green,
To yon grim sky-line clasping in its girth
The heart of all the glories of the earth.
Solemnly grand and peaceful all around
Half-ruined walls and temples from the ground
Spread upward to the skies again, and rose
In soft majestic splendour of repose,
Baffling a broad rich flood of lingering light ;
The sudden stridings of the Eastern night
Seemed to hang back reluctant, and to spare
The unwonted glow that pondered wistful there.
Mid golds and purples of the dying day
One monster shadow o'er the palace lay,
The Hanging Gardens of great Babylon
That wandered up to watch the sinking sun,
And still would tremble with a pale far glow
While the blue night crawled round their feet below.

And he, the Great, was dying in the calm
Of all that greatness. Each mysterious palm,
Each careless-chattering fountain purred at will
Unchecked, unhidden ; but all else was still
With more than evening's stillness,—street and mart,
The fevered pulses of that empire's heart.
Where was the hum of men ? the roar, the cries,
The hundred sounds that spake of enterprise,
Of ruthless glory and of restless fame,
Till all the welkin echo with his name,
Till the last lordling from his throne be hurled,
And Alexander fill the little world ?
Hushed one by one ; and they that wrought them, wait,
Thronging but silent, round the palace gate.

It seemed to rouse the king ; for once he turned—
The eyes were anger-bright, the pale face burned,—
And twice he strove to frame impatient words
And ask of that dark omen from his lords,
Was it a fear,—what fear ?—had made them cease ?
And twice he cursed that uncommanded peace.
It seemed to tell him that the die was cast,
The height was clambered now, the zenith past ;
And in the silence, in the fading light,
In the quick shadows of the coming night,
In those knit brows that waited round his bed,
In all the throbbings of a fevered head,

A voiceless certainty there seemed to rise,
And MENE MENE gloomed before his eyes :
There was no finger-writing on the wall,
No prophet-form stood forth before them all,
From whose unquestioned lips a king might hear
The voice of judgment cry, ' Thy doom is near.'
As in those self-same walls, not long ago
One man majestic stood, and dared to know,
And tell the meaning of their dark despair
To king and lords bowed down before him there,—
' The ruffling of the air before the wings
Of Vengeance swooping from the King of kings.'
Unknown, unthought of, while the feast ran high
With crash of gold and shout of revelry ;
Uncalled, uncared for by the sons of men,
Until the darkness and the hand,—and then,—
Then there was only one that had not sold
The keys of wisdom for the greed of gold,
One whose strong spirit no voluptuous mirth
Had dragged from high communings to the earth.
He stood a king mid all that band of slaves,
Like heavenward rock about whose feet the waves
Run wildly to and fro, distraught and pale,
Leaping and tumbling from the crags they scale ;
As if they knew that very far and high,
Beyond the wreathing foam and mist, the sky
Is calm and cloudless, and that yon rock-spire
Stretches aloft and bathes in liquid fire ;

That somewhere round its brow the sunbeams play
In the far azures of etherial day.

But now not so ; the dark was deeper far,—
No grasp of God, no prophet-soul, no star
In all that heathen night, whose lonely glow
By its own solitude might serve to shew
The darkness of the dark. A night was come,
Whose shadows might be felt ; yet all was dumb ;
Prophet or priest or seer, not one was there
To read the hidden writings of despair,
To pierce these clouds of doom before they burst,
And kill poor struggling Hope, and tell the worst.
And so a chilly silence brooded round,
And nothing brake it, save the fearful sound
Of one low step, that every now and then
Parted the arras and drew back again ;
And every time the leech would shake his head ;
But still no sigh was heard, no word was said,
And still the waiting eyes, the bated breath,
Made doubly drear that presence-hall of Death.

Oh for the kindly spell of gentle tears
To break that chain of thirty hardened years !
Years when he sought to raise himself so high
From all that bound him to humanity,
That he had cut the heart strings too ; and now
They could not weep for him, but only bow

The Death of

In awful pity, such as I have known,
To watch an Alpine crag, far-off, alone,
Battered with mountain-wreckage, till it leap
Down, down to ruin,—yet I could not weep.
So wistful, round yon bed the servants stand
Awe-bound, attent, to catch the least command ;
There were quick hands, and ready eyes and ears,
Honour, allegiance,—everything but tears.

Dear beauteous tears ! how freely, fondly, shed
Round the old pillow, by the dying head,
Where narrow hopes and lowly aims have reared
A life too little to be greatly feared ;
But not too little to be loved and blest,
The first of all his kinsfolk and the best.
Him hero-hearts shall follow to the grave,
And hero-women, trying to be brave :
Ah do not stay them, sacred, silent tears,
That soothe the heart-ache, and that blind the fears.

Then a strange flush came darkening on his
brow,
And the lips quivered ; he was wandering now,—
Wandering,—aye, far away and lost at last
In the dim lurid cloudland of the past,
Where every shape a fevered fancy drew
Went by and melted into something new,

And memory's chequered visions all were rife
With half the crowded pageant of his life.
And now, the palace and the bed forgot,
He seems to tread again the well-known spot,
Where the great master of the minds of men
Spake of the soul's hereafter once again :
And as he spake, himself sprang up and cried,
He would be more than mortal ere he died,—
So great that he would shake the spheres alone
And bind reluctant Nature to his throne.
Then ere the slow grave voice could make reply
The scene had shifted, and he seemed to lie—
Not yet immortal,—no, but grappling Death
By the far Cydnus, and to fight for breath,
And win, and rise emboldened from that bed
To dash the beaten fevers from his head,
And see his standards once again unfurled
To hunt the remnants of unconquered world.
And hark again ! the crash of stubborn walls,
Where Tyre in thunder to the ocean falls :
And Alexandria sea-born springs to be
Fair presage of his immortality.
Onward, and still no rest ; and once again
He turns his march where only sky and plain,
And sand and solitude, might seem to give
That fiery spirit ampler space to live,
And lead a host where seldom foot hath trod,
To wring his secret from the lips of God.

There in gaunt-swinging palm-shade, mid the cries
Of wild weird priests, and fearsome mysteries,—
A voice!—whose utterance shook that lonely shrine,
And hailed him 'Son of Heaven,' of race divine.

'The Son of Heaven,'—and the well-won name
Went ringing in his ears. But then there came
Another memory that lingered on,
And one he could not brook to think upon,
And yet so vivid! Under Syrian blue
Another temple gleamed upon his view,
And other priests, that slowly wended down
Where yon fair walls the vale of Cedron crown :
Stern and unbending came the white-robed band,
They bare no sign, no symbol in their hand,
But something in their look that uttered more,
A thought of God he never dreamed before.
So he looked on and wondered. There was given
No salutation to the Son of Heaven ;
None did obeisance ; yet he bowed his ear
To learn their unsought message ; and a fear—
A strange dim fear—came on him : he must fly,
And lead his army back,—he knew not why.

It was so solemn, that it almost seems
To stay the fever of delirious dreams,
And bring the workings of that troubled brain
A little moment to the earth again.

No, just a sigh : and then he hears the shout
That turned the headlong battle into rout,
And left a kingdom kingless at his feet.—
So now, the tale of triumph half complete,
He well might pause to pity, and to sigh
As conquerors can, who see the conquered die.

Again the breath came slower, and the dream
Passed out and widened to a shallow stream
Of thought.—Darius dead ! The King was dead !
Why then kings die !—most kings—

But flatterers said
That he was not as others, but should soar
To be among the stars for evermore :
Seeing no heaven might deny his worth
Who had so devastated God's fair earth ;
Him glories waited on beyond all ken ;—
Yet,—he who oft had felt like other men,
Felt, ah, so like them now ! Oh who could tell ?
Hell must be vast ! Are there not kings in Hell ?—
And he the great, the god, the world-enthroned,—
He writhed, and shook the purple coverlet, and groaned.

Upon the great abyss ! His eyes unclose
One short last moment ; and he sees,—he knows,
That he is there : with all the unreal past
Quick-fleeting into nothingness at last.

Oh spare him God ! He has so far to fall ;
The almost nothing,—not the All in all ! * * *

Aye, better so : better again to rave,
Than feel the foothold crumbling by a grave
So deep and awful, and to clutch in vain
For something real. Better that again
The lurid flash of half-rekindled sense
Burns him to madness and fond impotence.
And once again in headlong course he seems
To roam the vasty shadowland of dreams,
Half-fancied, half-remembered. So the flame
Went flickering on, till One more mighty came,—
Came near and laid his hand upon the brow,—
And all was quiet ; life was over now.
So the poor trembling lips were still at last,
And the flush died away and all was past,—
The agony of thought, the wild distress,—
And the last look was only emptiness.

Poor pitiful ending !

All the day is gone,
And a big summer moon creeps out and on
Up the cool silence of an Eastern sky.
In such a night a little child might die,
About whose bed soft angel-footsteps trod
To bear its gentle spirit back to God.

The great sky should have thundered, and the
night
Been torn with angry bolts, in whose red light
Unearthly forms, wild spirit-shapes should brood
And shriek the travails of a hell subdued,
And ampler heavens groaning in the thrall
Of him for whom this earth was all too small.
Yet the star-sprinkled river glints along,
No minor in her waters' undersong ;
And still the solemn moon rolls on o'erhead,
And the dew falls, until the night be sped ;
Till sunrise laughs along the rippled tide,
As if no king of all the earth had died.

* * * *

Ask thou not further ; how the joyous lands
Leaped up and shook away their shivered bands :
How a great gladness took the cowering Earth,
For whom her tyrant's death was Freedom's birth :
How she brake forth to singing, and how Peace
Came from her hiding-place, to breathe release.
Irony whispers 'This is Greatness' prize,
That Earth keeps holiday, when Greatness dies ;
When from her terror she awakes to share
The wild glad freedom of her mountain air.'—
Ask not of this ; lest sick at heart thou say
'There is no Greatness ; only death, decay.'

Is there no Greatness? Every vanished year
Sighs back across the past 'It is not here :'
'Not here' the echo comes from those old days
When Force was Greatness, and the greatest praise
Was to the strongest ; when the world adored
An iron idol, worshipped with the sword.
And now the age of Force has passed away,
Nor yet are we the better in our day ;
In this our Knowledge-age, when hope is old,
The iron idol is but changed to gold :
We seek eternal greatness by long pain,
In waxing wealth and wisdom. All in vain :
Still through the city-roar there haunts the ear
The old world-weary cry, 'Not here ; not here.'
The trophy-kingdom rots, the stone is dust,
The parchments crumble, and the brasses rust ;
And all the greatness human-nature owns,
Lasts but a little longer than the bones.

Is there no Greatness? From the void within
The hungry cry returns : and through the din
Of all false answers, hear the still small voice,
That breaks the idols of all ages' choice ;
That tells thee Greatness is a something more
Than all the earth hath dreamed of heretofore,—
'Not here, nor there, but in a self forgot,
Greatness is found of them that seek her not.'



NOTES.

PAGE 6.

Blessings of grateful gods—

Alexander had conciliated the people by rebuilding the temples of Belus and other deities in Babylon.

PAGE 6.

Where of Achilles' god-like line the star—

Alexander claimed descent from Achilles on his mother's side.

PAGE 8.

To yon grim sky-line—

The accounts of the two eye-witnesses, Herodotus and Statius, of the walls of Babylon are almost incredible: that they were at least 300 feet high, and 42 miles in circumference.

PAGE 8.

Half-ruined walls and temples—

Alexander had begun to rebuild the temples and walls which had been partially destroyed by Cyrus.

PAGE 13.

Where the great master—

"The mind of the great conqueror was specially influenced by the greatest conqueror in the world of thought."



